



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

Assembly and Executive Review Committee

**Stakeholder 'Call for Evidence' Paper on Review
Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly**

Section 1
Stakeholder Details

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Stakeholder Name	Telephone Number				
NUS-USI					
Stakeholder Address	Stakeholder Type (Include one or more X)				
NUS-USI 2 nd Floor 42 Dublin Road Belfast BT2 7HN	Registered Political Party		Local Government		
	Academic		Government		
	Legislature		Non-Government	X	
	Other (Please Specify)/ Member of the Public				
Please provide some background information on your role as a stakeholder					
<p>NUS-USI works on matters relating to students in Northern Ireland and also works on equality matters and other policy relating to the organisation.</p> <p>NUS-USI does not wish to be considered to provide oral evidence within this Review, and this paper covers NUS-USI's key thoughts on the Review.</p>					
Guidelines for Completion of Submissions					
<p>The Committee would ask that stakeholders submit <u>electronic</u> responses using this pro forma.</p> <p>Stakeholders should be aware that their written evidence will be discussed by the Committee in public session and included in the Committee's published Report.</p> <p>Stakeholders should also be aware that if they decide to publish their submissions, the publication would not be covered by Assembly privilege in relation to the law of defamation.</p>					

Section 2

Introduction

Powers

- 2.1. The Assembly and Executive Review Committee is a Standing Committee established in accordance with Section 29A and 29B of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (“the 1998 Act”) and Standing Order 59 which, amongst other powers, provide for the Committee to:
- I. make a report to the Secretary of State, the Assembly and the Executive Committee, by no later than 1 May 2015, on the operation of Parts III and IV of the Northern Ireland Act 1998; and
 - II. consider such other matters relating to the functioning of the Assembly or the Executive as may be referred to it by the Assembly.

Assembly and Executive Review Committee’s Terms of Reference for and approach to this Review

- 2.2. The Committee agreed the **Terms of Reference** of this Review on **24 June 2014** as follows:
- i. **Analyse the key challenges / barriers facing women in relation to entry into politics in Northern Ireland and in particular this Assembly**
 - ii. **Examine potential existing initiatives which would assist women in relation to entry into politics in this Assembly**
 - iii. **Examine what are the merits of ‘positive actions’ that have been successful within the United Kingdom and Ireland and within other jurisdictions, and to consider their potential impact in the context of Northern Ireland and in particular this Assembly**
 - iv. **Provide recommendations / conclusions on i to iii above, including initiatives / mechanisms to enhance the role of women already active in the political arena in Northern Ireland and in particular this Assembly**

Phase 1 – Review Evidence Gathering

The Review will take evidence on **Women in Politics in the Northern Ireland Assembly** in relation to the (i) to (iv) above. This will include evidence from **Assembly Research and Information Services, expert / academic witnesses, a**

public 'Call for Evidence' and from visits to other legislatures.

Phase 2 – Consideration and Report

The Committee will consider all evidence received in relation to **Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly** and report and provide recommendations / conclusions to the Assembly on these matters by in **late autumn 2014**.

Matters Outside the Scope of the Review

- 2.3. The Committee has agreed that the following issue is outside of the scope of the Review:
- **Alternative electoral systems / models**

Section 3

BACKGROUND

This section provides some background information on some issues being considered by the Committee as part of this Review.

3.1. The following sections provide information relating to **Women in politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly** drawn from the Northern Ireland Assembly Research & Information Service Research paper NIAR 570-13.¹

3.2 Statistical Outline

The Northern Ireland Assembly currently has 22 female Members out of a total of 108 (22%), although 20 women were elected in 2011, the net increase being due to two more female than male co-option by a party and independent Member replacing Members since the election. 38 female and 180 male candidates stood in the 2011 Assembly elections (17.4%).

If placed in international perspective alongside national legislatures, the Northern Ireland Assembly would rank 70th in the world. Apart from the Italian regional legislatures, the Northern Ireland Assembly has significantly lower female representation than comparable Western European legislatures.

The following figures place the Assembly in the perspective of female political representation in Northern Ireland and in general.

- 23.5% of Local Councillors in 2011 were women (compared with 31% in England)
- With 5 of 26 Mayors /Chairs of Councils were women
- 4 of 18 MPs are women (compared with 22% in GB)
- 2 of 3 MEPs are women (compared with 30% in GB)
- 4 of 15 Ministers and Junior Ministers are women
- 4 Chairpersons and 2 Deputy Chairperson of Committees are women out of 18 Committees

The representation of women in politics in Northern Ireland has a direct association with candidate selection. An examination of the 2011 Assembly elections indicates that female candidates generally fared better than their male counterparts in terms of votes won, but the lower numbers elected were more reflective of lower numbers of candidates.

3.3 Policy

The Beijing Platform for Action of 1995, which consists of a range of commitments by governments to address structural disadvantages experienced by women internationally, includes specific measures to increase women's participation in power and decision-making.

¹ http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2014/assembly_exec_review/potter0914.pdf

These include:

Strategic Objective G.1: Take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making.

Strategic Objective G.2: Increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership.

The Belfast Agreement 1998 includes a commitment to *'the right of women to full and equal political participation'*.

The vision for the Gender Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland states:

Men and women will be able to realise their full potential to contribute equally to the political, economic, social, (including caring roles) and cultural development of Northern Ireland and benefit equally from the results.

One of the Key Action Areas of the Strategy is *'representation in public life/decision-making'*, which is associated with the following strategic objectives:

- To achieve better collection and dissemination of data;
- To achieve gender balance on all government appointed committees, boards and other relevant official bodies;
- To actively promote an inclusive society; and
- To ensure the participation of women and men in all levels of peace building, civil society, economy and government

3.5 Legislative Frameworks

Elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly are provided for in the Northern Ireland Act 1998. There are no provisions for gender equality relating to elections in the Act.

The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 amends the Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976 to exempt the selection of election candidates from the provision of the Order. This enables political parties to use positive discrimination for the promotion of women candidates over men. This provision has been extended to 2030.

Further information on barriers to women's participation within legislatures; examples of proposals, mechanisms to overcome barriers; quotas and support mechanisms to increase the political participation are set out in paper NIAR 570-13.

www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RaSe/Publications/2014/assembly_exec_review/potter0914.pdf

Section 4

Questions to consider

(1) Question

What are the key challenges / barriers facing women in relation to entering politics in Northern Ireland, and in particular the Northern Ireland Assembly, and what evidence can you provide on this?

NUS-USI believes that there are significant barriers facing women regarding entering politics in Northern Ireland, and NUS-USI believes that it is extremely important that more women get involved in politics here. Any traditional aspects as regards politics in Northern Ireland could potentially be one of the barriers. Any tribalism and division in politics and society in Northern Ireland could be a very significant factor.

Issues which can contribute to barriers facing women, particularly with families, and men with families are possibly the anti-social hours of Assembly sittings and a potential lack of childcare facilities at the Assembly.

A lack of equality on some key issues in Northern Ireland can create a negative narrative and this could create potential barriers for women as regards politics in Northern Ireland. Negative narratives on equality issues could significantly dissuade people from becoming involved in politics.

A potential lack of compulsory positive action by the state or by political parties to encourage more women to get involved in politics could also be a barrier.

Any forms of sexism from the media could act as another significant deterrent as regards women getting involved in politics.

(2) Question

Can you provide evidence on initiatives which demonstrates positive outcomes to encourage more women to pursue a career in politics which could be applied to the Northern Ireland Assembly?

The Labour Party in some other parts of the UK has used all-women shortlists in candidate selection in some constituencies.

Twinning can also be used and this matches one constituency with another, and one women

and one man are selected for the constituencies. The Labour party used this for Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly elections in 1999.

Party list quotas have been used by Plaid Cymru and the Conservative Party, and with this system parties can choose that a certain percentage of candidates on their list will be women.

In the Republic of Ireland, legislation has been passed as regards gender quota at the next general election.

(3a) Question

What policies should political parties have in place to increase the number of women candidates in Northern Ireland elections?

Political parties could potentially create quotas in relation to election candidates or people contesting selection contests to be a candidate or an elected representative.

Political parties should also pro-actively create strategies to engage with and encourage women to get involved in politics and stand for election. Political parties could also employ or designate a staff member as an equality officer to potentially lead this extremely important work.

Political parties could also create a women's committee or women's network within their party. This committee should consist only of women and be a forum where women can raise issues around potential barriers to politics and to discuss initiatives to get more women involved in politics.

Political parties could also create mentoring schemes so that women who are elected representatives or senior staff or senior members of the party can act as a mentor to women who have recently joined the party or are considering standing for election. NUS-USI believes that it is vitally important that parties act to encourage more women to get involved politics.

(3b) Question

Political Parties are asked to specify what policies and initiatives they have in place to increase women in political life?

(This box will expand as you type)

(4) Question

What 'positive actions' would you recommend to increase women's representation in the Northern Ireland Assembly?

In terms of positive action, parties should create quotas in terms of women candidates for election, possibly 50% women, 50% others as this could significantly increase diversity.

Another positive action that parties could take might be around creating a quota in terms of ministerial appointments and Assembly Committee Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson posts.

(5) Question

What recommendations would you put forward to enhance the role of women already active in the political arena in Northern Ireland (providing evidence for recommendations as applicable)?

NUS-USI would advocate that political parties should ensure that their appointments to ministerial posts and Assembly Committee Chair and Deputy Chair positions are allocated to ensure a fair gender balance across parties.

Parties should also have a fair gender balance in their appointments of posts involving Councillors in Councils and Council Committees and where possible in other elected institutions.

The Northern Ireland Executive should also create strategy to try and increase the number of women in leadership and in politics in Northern Ireland.

Research should be commissioned by the Northern Ireland Executive into potential barriers and factors as regards women getting involved in politics. The research could also examine any possible changes needed to try and ensure a fair gender balance in politics.

(6) Question

Do you consider there are specific initiatives / actions that the Northern Ireland Assembly as an institution should take to enhance the role of women in politics, including a gender sensitive environment – and if so please include your recommendations.

Childcare facilities for MLAs and party staff as well as Assembly staff should be made available for both women and men at the Assembly.

The Assembly should consider ensuring Assembly sittings finish at 6pm. This will ensure that people with children, both men and women, have working hours that involve less late night work.

The Assembly could run outreach programmes around Northern Ireland specifically to engage with women and encourage women to get involved in politics. This programme could give women the opportunity to talk to MLAs in their area directly at events and raise potential barriers to involvement in politics as well as discussing other matters. Having a forum like this where women can talk to and hear from women who are involved politics could make a very positive impact in encouraging women to become involved in political life.

The Assembly could create bursaries for women to receive a paid work placement for a few months with a political party, and this insight could encourage greater participation in politics.

NUS-USI would also encourage the Assembly to examine policies and legislation that has gone through or is going through the Assembly to ensure that there is gender equality in all the work of and policies of the Assembly. The Assembly should also take a very strong approach against on any behaviour or remarks that go against gender equality at the Assembly.

It is very important that the Assembly ensures that there is a culture of equality and encouragement to ensure that diversity in politics can be promoted as effectively as possible.

Section 5

Additional Information

Please provide any additional information which you believe will be of assistance to the Committee during the course of the Review.

(This box will expand as you type)

Section 6

Contact Details

All responses should be sent by email please to:

The Committee Clerk
Assembly and Executive Review Committee
Room 241
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Belfast
BT4 3XX

Tel: 028 90521787 or
028 90521928

To arrive no later than Wednesday 3 September 2014 please

Email: committee.assembly&executivereview@niassembly.gov.uk

Thank you for your submission